Into the Light - Reflections from a New Coach
John Pieper, Wisconsin

Since 1989 the Walt Disney Company has presented Disney’s American Teacher Awards, saluting outstanding members of the teaching profession. Specifically, the program honors those teachers whose approach exudes exuberant teaching and who inspire a joy of learning in their students. In 2003 John Pieper was one of 30 teachers nationwide who received this award. CFG coaches training was one of the benefits included with this special recognition.

In our next three issues we are going to follow John’s journey as a new CFG coach.

I n the midst of a magical Disney experience, I found myself facing an element of darkness. It wasn’t a literal darkness, but rather that unsettling feeling you get when you are about to face a totally new situation that you know absolutely nothing about. Fortunately, I would not be facing this adventure alone. A collection of equally bewildered teachers, all relative strangers, assembled in a large hall. There was an air of mystique and anticipation. We were to receive a year’s training in something called Critical Friends Groups. Little did I know that this training would start me on an incredible journey.

Stephen Spring and Steven Srrull were the Zen-like guides who would lead us through this personal and professional transformation. They were totally in control. I remember being very impressed with how effortlessly they moved us from concept to activity to another. They instilled a sense of confidence in us as we took the time to practice these things called protocols. Not only was I given the opportunity to look inward, but more important, the participants were able to exchange ideas with each other. This group of relative strangers connected in an amazing way. As a new CFG coach it would be my responsibility to generate a basic understanding of the CFG work with the staff at my school.

I was chomping at the bit to gather a team of recruits and lead them into meaningful CFG work. There was student work to be tuned, articles to be shared, norms to be implemented and reflections to be written. But alas, by the time I became a “certified” CFG coach, it was too late in the year to organize a real CFG. I had to be content to scheme and dream. My enthusiasm continued throughout the summer.

The other portion of my action plan was also a reflection of my idealistic thinking. My vision was to carry this work beyond my school to as far as I could take it. The new school year has started and I will begin the implementation of my plan within the next week. We have often used the lighthouse as a symbol for learning at our school. As I reflect on my CFG training, that symbolism takes on new meaning. Education can be a storm tossed sea. We have many at risk students who need to be beckoned into the safety and calm of our welcoming harbor. We offer the light of knowledge. How smooth the sailing will be if my light is passed on to those around me. It is my time to shine.

John Pieper is a fifth grade teacher at Webster Stanley Elementary School in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. John’s background includes regular and special education teaching experiences. He has been teaching for twenty-two years. John can be reached at jpieper@new.rr.com.

Report from the Directors
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agree that she brings distinct qualities of leadership to NSRF that will complement our existing governance structure to support and serve our national community well.

Debbi will take over the Co-Director position held by Steve Bonchek (Roc) for the last four years. As a result of the growth of Harmony Education Center (HEC) and NSRF, Roc will work full-time as Executive Director of HEC, and thus have more time available to invest in guiding the upcoming multi-million dollar Capital Campaign for HEC (which includes NSRF), which will ensure permanent national presence for our school reform work. We expect that Roc will play a vital role in NSRF, continuing many of the networking responsibilities he had as an NSRF Co-Director. In addition, he will serve as a member of the NSRF Accountability Council.

I will continue to serve as NSRF’s founding Co-Director, working closely with Daniel Baron and Debbi Laidley, as well as with the Chair of the Accountability Council, Frances Hensley. While our working relationship will continue to be collaborative and democratic, the Accountability Council has requested that I assume the title “Facilitating Co-Directors,” in acknowledgement of the organization’s need for one co-director who is ultimately accountable. All three co-directors will serve part-time.

We look forward to Debbi’s tenure in her new position and Roc’s service in his expanded role with HEC.

Gene Thompson-Grove can be contacted at gthompsongrove@earthlink.net, Debbi Laidley can be contacted at debra.laidley@lausd.net, Daniel Baron can be contacted at dbaron@bloomington.in.us, and Steve “Roc” Bonchek can be reached at harmony@indiana.edu.

Some Highlights of NSRF’s History

March 1995
NSRF was established at Brown University by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR), with Paula Evans, Faith Dunne, and Gene Thompson-Grove as its founding Co-Directors. Paula was also the Director of Professional Development at AISR; Gene and Faith were Principal Associates.

January 1999
NSRF’s Founding Co-Directors Faith Dunne and Gene Thompson-Grove announced that NSRF would be leaving AISR, and that the Harmony Education Center in Bloomington, Indiana would assume responsibility for being the National Center for NSRF.

June 2000
The first NSRF council met and formed the foundation for the organization, including:
- A draft mission statement
- A governance structure for the organization that included:
  - National Center
  - Centers of Activity
  - Council
  - Clusters of Interest

June 2001
A mission statement was agreed upon: The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone.

Gene Thompson-Grove, Faith Dunne, Daniel Baron and Steve Bonchek assumed the responsibility for being NSRF’s Co-Directors.

August 2001
Faith Dunne passed away; her position as Co-Director was not filled.

December 2002
At the recommendation of the NSRF Council, the Co-Directors invited a group of NSRF facilitators to revisit the NSRF governance structure. This retreat created the new governance structure that was approved at the January 2003 Council Meeting. It included:
- Three co-directors as responsible for decisions
- The formation of an NSRF National Accountability Council that would hold the directors accountable for decisions made
- A NSRF Centers of Activity Council

May 2004
Acting on the charge to actively seek out leaders who reflect the diversity of the NSRF constituency, the Accountability Council recommended the appointment of Debbi Laidley as Co-Director of NSRF.

The Accountability Council endorsed Roc Bonchek’s move from Co-Director of NSRF to Executive Director of Harmony Education Center.